

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE APR 2012		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2012 to 00-00-2012	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE What Do You Mean, 'SHAPE Isn't NATO Headquarters'?				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Army Engineer School,Engineer Professional Bulletin,464 MANSCEN Bldg 3201 Ste 2661,Fort Leonard Wood,MO,65473				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 2	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

What Do You Mean, “SHAPE Isn’t NATO Headquarters”?

By Lieutenant Colonel Chris Becking

Imagine my excitement as I considered my assignment to Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), in Mons, Belgium. But upon arriving, that excitement turned into a growing confusion, culminating in the question: What do you mean, “SHAPE isn’t NATO headquarters”? Thus began 6 weeks of learning the basics of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), followed by a year of discovering how much more there was to learn. While our alliance partners may easily serve multiple NATO assignments during their military careers, U.S. Army Soldiers rarely receive even one NATO assignment in a typical career. From my own experience, and the similar experience of most of my U.S. Army peers working in NATO, I believe that our U.S. Army education (formal and informal) about NATO is severely lacking. However, as the United States moves to a more austere future budget (just as our alliance partners are doing), we are likely to conduct more operations with NATO. Thus, to be effective contributors in these future operations, we need to obtain a better working knowledge of NATO structures and operations, dispel some misconceptions about NATO, and review some practical tips.

NATO Overview

In April 1949, 12 countries formed NATO by signing the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington, D.C., to ensure the collective defense of North America and Europe. From its inception, NATO has remained a political and military alliance to prevent conflict. With six expansions from 1952 to 2009, NATO has grown to an alliance of 28 nations, headquartered in Brussels, Belgium. At the Lisbon Summit in 2010, NATO adopted a new strategic concept with three key tasks:

- Collective defense.
- Crisis management.
- Cooperative security.

Another key item from the Lisbon Summit was the commitment to undertake the largest reorganization of NATO command structures to date. When the reorganization is complete, currently planned for 2013, NATO will retain the headquarters in Brussels, supported by two subordinate strategic headquarters: Allied Command Transformation and Allied Command Operations.

Allied Command Transformation

Allied Command Transformation, based in Norfolk, Virginia, will continue to ensure the interoperability and continued transformation of NATO; its roles are parallel to many roles of the former U.S. Joint Forces Command. In addition, Allied Command

Transformation oversees the 16 NATO centers of excellence. With functions similar to the U.S. Army Engineer School, the NATO Military Engineering Centre of Excellence is in Ingolstadt, Germany. NATO also maintains the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Centre of Excellence in Trencin, Slovakia, and the Counter Improvised Explosive Devices Centre of Excellence in Madrid, Spain. These facilities are critical resources for training, standardization, and doctrine development.

Allied Command Operations

Allied Command Operations, led by SHAPE in Belgium, will continue to serve as the strategic command responsible for executing NATO operations. At the end of the reorganization in 2013, it will oversee two subordinate joint force commands, to be located in Naples, Italy, and Brunssum, the Netherlands. It is through these joint force commands that NATO will oversee its six ongoing operations. Most familiar to Americans are the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and the Kosovo Force (KFOR) in Kosovo. However, NATO also conducts three other operations:

- Operation Ocean Shield, which provides security to the seas off the Horn of Africa.
- Operation Active Endeavor, which deters terrorism throughout the Mediterranean region.
- NATO support to the African Union, which provides critical support to stabilize Africa.

Additionally, NATO successfully completed the following significant operations in 2011:

- NATO Training Mission–Iraq, which helped develop the Iraqi Security Forces.
- Operation Unified Protector, which helped protect the civilian population of Libya.

Misconceptions About NATO

Not only must we understand NATO to be better contributors to possible future alliance operations, but we must also leave behind several common misconceptions about NATO.

The United States pays 50 percent of NATO costs. This is one of the most common—and most misleading—sound bites I hear. The U.S. share of NATO expenses is currently 22 percent.¹ While the United States contributes the largest single share of the NATO budget, the cost-sharing percentages are based generally on the size of

national economies and have been agreed to by all 28 alliance nations. The 50 percent figure often mentioned in the media is more correctly related to the comparison of the U.S. annual defense budget with the budgets of other alliance members. If combined with the defense budgets of all other NATO nations, the U.S. annual defense budget would account for more than 50 percent of defense spending by all NATO nations. The bottom line is that we aren't paying more than half of NATO costs; we are spending more on our own defense than the other 27 NATO countries combined.

NATO countries/forces/personnel don't do anything. This is another favorite complaint of American service members; and again, it is far from the truth. Consider that France (a popular target for U.S. criticism) has approximately 13,000 personnel deployed throughout the world, with half of those in Africa alone. Or that Italy has maintained more than 2,500 personnel deployed to Lebanon since 2007. These are only two examples of numerous ally commitments. The efforts of our NATO allies in these conflict areas have freed the United States to devote resources elsewhere. On a smaller scale, remember that U.S. Army engineers recently renewed the development of several critical capabilities—including mine clearing and the use of mine detection dogs—by learning from allies who have been employing them in conflicts throughout the world almost continually for years. While we may always wish that our allies could do more to support the United States, we need to fully understand what they are already doing to help us.

NATO forces have too many caveats to be effective. This misconception is often quoted by the media in reference to the ISAF operation in Afghanistan. For example, of the 49 nations contributing troops to ISAF, few have provided their forces with no caveats—even the United States provides guidance on the employment of its forces. While some caveats are more restrictive than others, they are a reflection of national political climates, not of the militaries themselves. As Soldiers, we need to respect the capabilities of each military and accept the fact that they operate within the limitations their governments establish, just as we do in the United States.

Americans do all the work on any NATO staff exercise/operation. Many Americans make this claim, which is simply not true. While most NATO partners will readily acknowledge the hard work and contributions of Americans, they can just as easily point to instances where Americans don't fully appreciate the contributions of other partners. U.S. Soldiers should be proud of their reputation for representing their country well and carrying their share of the workload. However, they should always acknowledge the unique contributions of all NATO partners.

Tips for Success at NATO

Whether you find yourself assigned to a NATO headquarters or leading your platoon on a joint project with a platoon from another NATO country, there are a few simple steps to success in any NATO environment.

Leave the bragging at home. Most NATO personnel are fully aware of U.S. military capabilities compared to their own. You need not remind them of this; NATO is no place for boasting about your own country.

Learn to listen. Many NATO partners have wide experience and would be happy to share with those who will listen. Ask questions to solicit their views; and then listen to their response, only speaking to ask clarifying questions.

Understand what consensus means in NATO. Contrary to what occurs in most American military culture, many NATO meetings are more about building consensus rather than making decisions. All views are considered and valued; decisions often are not delivered until a consensus is reached.

Be thankful you speak English. While many of our allies are forced to learn English to operate in NATO, we don't have to overcome this additional hurdle. Appreciate the efforts of our allies to learn and speak English. Be patient and supportive as you communicate with each other.

Appreciate the long-term views of NATO nations. Americans are routinely characterized as being interested only in short-term goals. Many of our alliance partners take much longer views of issues, big and small. While a bit different from our own, these world views can be particularly helpful in developing solutions to difficult problems.

Go for coffee. This may sound silly, but surprising progress can be made in developing a working relationship by simply sitting down to talk. Get to know your alliance partners in a relaxed setting; your working relationship will go more smoothly from there.

Even if you don't find yourself assigned to a NATO position in the near future, the chances of U.S. Army engineers working with NATO allies continue to increase. Keeping in mind the basic NATO history and structure, dispelling the common misconceptions, and acting on a few practical tips will ensure that your NATO interaction won't leave you feeling as lost and confused as I once was.



Endnote:

¹NATO Resource Policy and Planning Board, "NATO Common-Funded Budgets and Programmes—Cost Share Arrangements Valid from 1/1/2010 to 31/12/2011," <www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2010_01/20101102_NATO_common_funded_budgets_2010-2011.pdf>, accessed on 25 January 2012.

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